CHAPTER-8
ASSIMILATION

8.1 ASSIMILATION

Following Daniel Jones, given below are three kinds of distinctive phenomena to which the term assimilation has been applied:

(i) Similitude,

(ii) Historical assimilation,

(ii) Contextual or juxtapositional assimilation.

(i) Similitude:

A particular sequence of two phonemes involves the use of a certain subsidiary member of one of them which has a greater resemblance to a neighbouring sound than the principle member has. For example, small [smɔl], behind [bihaind], eighth [eitθ], language [læŋgwidʒ], music [mju:zik] etc

(ii) Historical Assimilation:

Historical assimilation takes place in the course of development of a language and by a word which was pronounced in a certain way came to be pronounced subsequently in another way. For example, the change of /m/ to /n/ which has taken
place in the word ant [ænt]. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries this word was written amete and amte and was no doubt pronounced [æmətə] and later [æmtə] and [æmt], spellings with n in place of m first appeared in the fifteenth century, clearly indicating the change to the modern pronunciation [ænt].

(iii) Contextual or Juxtapositional Assimilation:

Contextual or juxtapositional assimilations are changes in pronunciation which take place under certain circumstances at the ends and the beginnings of words when these words occur in connected speech, or in compounds. For example, the word is is usually pronounced [iz], and the word she is pronounced [ʃi]; but when these two words come together in the phrase is she, they are often pronounced [izʃi] rather than [izʃi].

They are similar in so far as the sequence [-zʃ-] is made by one and the same articulatory posture, whereas the sequence [-zʃ-] requires a succession of two different articulatory postures. These are termed as regressive and progressive assimilation.

(a) Regressive Assimilation: The features of one phoneme may affect the features of the phoneme preceding it. An example of regressive assimilation is the realization of /l/ as [l] (voiced dental lateral) in the word health, i.e. under the influence of the following dental sound.
(b) **Progressive Assimilation:**

The features of one phoneme may affect the features of the phoneme following it. An example of progressive assimilation is the realization of /|/ as [l] (voiceless alveolar lateral) in the word *please*, i.e. under the influence of [pʰ] (aspirated voiceless bilabial plosive) that precedes it. Historical assimilation, like contextual assimilation, may be either regressive or progressive and they too can be shown to result in economy of effort by effecting a saving in either the number, or the extent, of movements and adjustments either of the state of the glottis, the velum, or the articulators.

**8.2 Role/Functions of Assimilation**

Assimilations are not 'compulsory' in many languages, including English. The result of the assimilation is to reduce the number, or the extent, of the movements and adjustments which the speech-producing organs have to perform in the transition from one word to the next. Assimilations save effort by means of three different sorts of changes in the sequence of speech producing movements:

(i) those involving the state of the glottis;
(ii) those involving velic action;
(iii) those involving movement of the articulators.
(i) **Assimilations Involving the State of the Glottis:** The result of making an assimilation of this type is that two successive different states of the glottis are replaced by a single state which is maintained unchanged. For instance, two words might be brought next to each other in an utterance, one with a voiced segment and one with a voiceless segment at the point of contact; an adjustment in the state of the glottis would therefore be necessary in the transition from the one to the other, if they remain as they are. Regressive assimilations of voice may be found very commonly, though not universally, among the speakers of educated Scots. Thus, the word *with,* which under most circumstances ends in a voiceless consonant in Scottish English, may be pronounced with a voiced one in *with them.* Similarly in the compounds *blackboard* or *birthday,* the words *black* and *birth* which normally ends in voiceless consonants, may be pronounced with voiced ones. Such regressive assimilations of voice appear to be found in no other kind of English, though they are the regular thing in French, Dutch and several other languages.

Assimilations of voicelessness are common in all types of English. Many people make a regressive assimilation of voicelessness when they pronounce the phrases, *life: of course* or *have to,* etc., with the voiceless consonant [*f*] (instead of the voiced [*v*]).
(ii) **Assimilations Involving Velic Action:** An assimilation of this type effects an economy by eliminating a movement of the velum. When a nasal (or nasalized) segment at the boundary of one word and an oral segment at the boundary of another are brought next to each other in an utterance, the movement of the velum required in the transition between them is eliminated if both become nasal, or both lose their nasality. Such assimilations are rare in English, but they may be found in other languages.

(iii) **Assimilations Involving Movements of the Articulators:**
In an assimilation of this kind, successive movements of two different articulators are replaced by a movement of one articulator only. This is the most frequent type of assimilation in English and a wide variety of examples can be found. In the majority of cases they are regressive. The pronunciation of *is she* as [l3ʃi] comes under this heading. Other examples are: [tɛmminits] for ten minutes, [aŋ goʊɪŋ] for I’m going.

Assimilations of this third type may often be combined with assimilations involving the state of the glottis. Thus [lʃi] may be heard for *is she*, as well as [l3ʃi], the voiceless [ʃ] taking the place of the voiced [ʒ] or [z].